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Editor’s Introduction

Walter Metz

In his excellent work on national cinema, Andrew Higson suggests that the demarcations of a particular national cinema are fluid rather than clearly defined. Thus, a national cinema looks very different whether one considers production or exhibition as the key term for delineation. Using this notion as a point of departure, I began thinking about the intertextual implications of the study of national cinemas. If one could begin thinking of the films of Stanley Kubrick via both their British production contexts as well as their American reception contexts, for example, might not the trans-national nature of film culture be worth attending to in a systematic way?

This issue of Film Criticism focuses on French cinema of the 1990s via such an intertextual and trans-national focus. I have selected essays that study recent French films in dialogue with other non-French texts. Thus, Christopher Orr’s “A Working Class Hero(ine) is Something to Be” reads Erick Zonca’s 1998 French film, The Dreamlife of Angels, in intertextual comparison with Paul Schrader’s 1998 American film, Affliction, using the concept of literary naturalism. In “Inverting French Heritage Cinema,” Michael DeAngelis reads Leos Carax’s 1999 French film, Pola X, as an adaptation of Herman Melville’s nineteenth century American novel, Pierre, or the Ambiguities. Steve Carr’s “The Holocaust in the Text” analyzes the differences between the explicit representation of the Holocaust in Claude Lelouch’s 1995 French film version of Les Misérables and the indirect allegorization of the Holocaust in Billie August’s 1998 Hollywood film version of Victor Hugo’s novel. Finally, my own essay argues that the source of Olivier Assayas’ Irma Vep (1996) lies beyond its references to the films of Louis Feuillade and François Truffaut, extending as far as the American avant-garde of Stan Brakhage.

In the midst of my work on this intertextual project, Hilary Radner (Professor of Film and Media Studies at the University of Otago, New Zealand) suggested to me that one problem in American studies of French cinema is the absence of French film scholars’ voices. As a corrective to this, she suggested a translation of French film scholar Noël Herpe’s outstanding essay, published in French in Positif (number 443, Spring 1998), entitled, “Will There Ever Be a New French Cinema?” Dr. Radner kindly arranged for Thierry Jutel to translate the piece for this issue. By relying on the full gamut of French films rather than the handful that get released in the United States, Herpe constructs a complex view of the relationship between French film history and the films of the 1990s.

I have placed Herpe’s essay at the front of the issue because his work serves to put into relief, and to offer differing insights into, the films studied by the other authors. For example, Herpe pays much less attention to the notion of “heritage cinema” than does DeAngelis’ essay in this issue, or than is investigated in Phil Powrie’s French Cinema in the 1990s, the most complete English-language book on recent French cinema. Herpe’s lament that recent French cinema replays 1930s poetic realism rather than offering something new—and arguing that it is immature because it does little other than recycle past film traditions—offers a much less positive take on this connection than does Orr’s invocation of Renoir’s La Bête humaine (1938) as a politically progressive source for the naturalism of The Dreamlife of Angels.

Herpe’s treatment of the politics of history in Jeanne and the Perfect Guy (1998) and its reference to Jacques Demy’s The Umbrellas of Cherbourg (1964) offers a similar move to Carr’s treatment of the use of history vis-à-vis the Holocaust references in the Les Misérables films. Herpe’s treatment of new French filmmakers’ replication of the Romantic attachments to individual artistry practiced by their French New Wave predecessors offers a more critical view of Romanticism’s theoretical possibilities than that offered in my study of Irma Vep and Lelouch’s Les Misérables.

At stake here is a highlighting of what tradition means within various situational contexts. Where Herpe sees a French cinema incapable of inventing a new path out of its internal referencing, the other authors discuss the same films as interesting via their contrast with American cultural artifacts. For these American critics, the internal histories of French cinema are much less pressing than for Herpe.

This is not to suggest that either Herpe or the other critics in this issue have found the true, unchanging meaning of any of these film texts. Instead, I hope that this fascinating juxtaposition between Herpe’s
Will There Ever Be a New French Cinema?

Noël Herpe
Translated by Thierry Jutel

Impressively panoramic view of French films of the 1990s and the American critics’ iconoclastic readings of individual films demonstrates the multiplicities of the cinema’s potential to engage meaning. Knowing why Carr finds Les Misérables meaningful, while Herpe and most of the authors of the Powrie anthology do not, allows me to see Lelouch’s film anew. Similarly, knowing that Herpe positions Irma Vep as a successful breaking of the shackles that confined Assayas’ earlier, “novelistic” films allows me to bolster my own project of celebrating that film’s director’s impossibly avant-garde version of Feuillade’s Les Vampires.

In short, I hope that this issue fulfills Leslie Fiedler’s famous hope that criticism should say as many interesting things as possible. I believe that French cinema of the 1990s, as it is depicted in this issue, offers a vibrant, resonant engagement with the cultural circumstances of our lives in the wake of the new century’s dawn.

Works Cited


In Les Enfants de la liberté [Freedom’s Children, 1997], Claude-Marie Trémois praises the New French Cinema of the 1990s. The author’s dream of a “new New Wave”—one that emerged with Un monde sans pitié (Eric Rochant, 1989; released in the U.S. in 1991 as Love Without Pity) and shook the pillars of an ossified establishment—is seductive. This is in fact the “eternal return” (on-going for 30 years) of a Romantic discourse that resuscitates the rhetorical flourishes of the 1950s in order to wave the flag of the “new” revolution. On one side, we find those already dismissed as “old” young filmmakers (yesterday Claude Sautet, today Jacques Audiard) who continue the tradition of a cinema of manipulation and mastery.

On the other hand, there are filmmakers who are necessarily categorized as talented to the extent that they fulfill certain expectations. These include: believing in the virtues of disorder and improvisation, privileging the single-shot sequence and the moving camera (as opposed to quick-cutting), and loving one’s characters by giving them the freedom to go wherever they want. Operating here is a post-Bazinian mystique (via the mandatory reference to John Cassavetes), based on a false argument that assumes salvation can be imagined only as the result of the exclusive cult of the real. The real, a complex notion, functions as a magical incantation: as long as there is submission to the effect of the real, there is freedom (as if freedom cannot be found
The Holocaust in the Text: Victor Hugo’s Les Misérables and the Allegorical Film Adaptation

Steven Alan Carr

At the end of the last century, films such as Schindler’s List (Stephen Spielberg, 1994) and Life Is Beautiful (Roberto Benigni, 1998) prompted a reactionary reassertion of modernist approaches to representing the Holocaust. In particular, some critics have heaped scorn upon Life Is Beautiful for its purported trivialization of life in a concentration camp. Such criticism signals a deeper crisis in representation: no depiction will ever represent the Holocaust authentically, yet any depiction revealing its own artifice remains vulnerable to accusations of trivializing the Shoah. Films such as Schindler’s List garner critical acclaim for authenticating their representation by eliding the signifier (the cinematic depiction) with the signified (memory of the Holocaust). Yet, as Elie Wiesel argues in his well-known article “Trivializing Memory,” “no one could imagine Auschwitz,” just as “no one can now retell Auschwitz after Auschwitz” (165). This crisis reveals both the vicissitudes of representing the Holocaust, particularly in popular media, as well as the vicissitudes of representation in general. If the Holocaust remains, as Lawrence Langer has argued, an unparalleled historical event where any attempt at parallel can only work to trivialize it, then judging the experience of viewing a film about the Holocaust against the so-called reality of that representation would appear to achieve the ultimate trivialization.

However, the crisis over representation of the Holocaust has more to do with a shifting set of social and cultural standards. For example, Wiesel’s article promotes the kind of high culture/ low culture distinction that ultimately condemns the figurative Life Is Beautiful while vaunting the literalism of Schindler’s List. This view relies on the underlying assumption that the audience remains either too stupid or passive to distinguish between a film that recreates the Holocaust and the Holocaust itself. Even Norman Finkelstein, critical of Elie Wiesel and the so-called Holocaust Industry, demonstrates his own bias against popular culture, arguing that “only a handful of books and films” touched on the Holocaust before the Israeli Six Day War of 1967. Finkelstein attributes the surge in American interest in the Holocaust to the interests of American foreign policy in the Middle East and a duped American public.

Whatever one believes about the trivialization of the Shoah—whether it be a pandering to the audience or a promotion of a pro-Zionist agenda—criticism addressing the representation of the Holocaust in film all too often suffers from its own excessive literalism. Significant, much of this criticism focuses only on the most obvious targets: films that announce themselves as being about the Holocaust. If the Shoah has no parallel in its singular trauma, or if it indeed has enough rhetorical power to drive seemingly unrelated economic decisions and foreign policy matters, then surely one must look beyond the overt representations of the Holocaust. One must look at the ways in which the Holocaust speaks through texts that, on superficial reading, appear to have little or nothing to do with the Holocaust and fail to conform to the literal strictures of the genre of the Holocaust text.

This analysis, then, will consider two late-twentieth century film adaptations of Victor Hugo’s classic 1862 novel, Les Misérables, that resonate both overtly and covertly with the Holocaust. A 1995 French version directed by Claude Lelouch directly interrogates the relationship between Hugo’s novel and Vichy France. A 1998 U.S. production directed by Bille August briefly and implicitly evokes Holocaust imagery while ostensibly remaining faithful to the text. The late twentieth century popularity of Hugo’s novel signals a profound resonance between the book and a modernist response to the Holocaust. At the same time, however, this modernist response—which vaunts
Schindler’s List for its realism while demonizing Life Is Beautiful for its artifice—reaches its ideological limits when one attempts to engage the cinematic adaptations of Hugo’s novel within the historical context of the Holocaust. While this analysis seeks to highlight the ways in which film adaptations of Hugo’s text resonate with the Holocaust, it does not seek to promote the cultural capital of either adaptation of this novel, or admit either film to some pantheon of Holocaust texts. Rather, it seeks to locate the cultural capital of Les Misérables itself within a socially significant context.

Situating these adaptations within this context is important for two reasons. First, the approach taken here continues a larger scholarly project. This project attempts to read texts—regardless of their cultural capital—as symptomatic responses to broadly defined ideological themes. In one of the most impressive applications of this approach, for example, Walter Metz reads Fritz Lang’s Rancho Notorious (1952) as a generic response to the Holocaust. What seemed to define Lang’s film as a quirky Western in earlier scholarship—its narrative of retribution, its references to atrocity, and Marlene Dietrich’s seemingly anachronistic German accent—receives a much more compelling and profound explanation from Metz’s allegorical interpretation.

Beyond the worthiness of a trans-historical project, however, situating adaptations of Les Misérables within a socially significant context can help yield new insights into the increasing globalization of the Holocaust. A kind of representational shorthand for the Holocaust has emerged from Schindler’s List, if not before this film, and disparate films have more frequently invoked Holocaust imagery to serve a variety of ideological and cultural agendas. Given that the Holocaust gets invoked in a variety of arenas, ranging from debates over Israeli military occupation of the West Bank to debates over abortion, to ignore the appropriation of the Holocaust in these and other debates is to ignore the uses and abuses of Holocaust imagery at one’s own peril.

While one could argue that this approach reads too much meaning into a text or reads meaning that is not there, much of the work in cultural studies suggests that meaning does not reside in the text as vessel, but rather emerges out of a negotiated relationship between text and reader. As an interpretive strategy, modernism treats all meaning as residing within the text, ultimately mystifying what one cannot readily interpret: the personal vision of the director, the sanctity of the artistic experience, and narrative ambiguities. In 1935, however, Walter Benjamin warned of how just this kind of reactionary undertow of cult value can thrive in mass culture. Thus the ultimate trivialization of the Holocaust takes place in the refusal to explore its many unexpected and arguably unintended manifestations within popular culture, instead asserting an almost religious devotion to a self-anointed, self-serving, and highly constrained realism so often deployed when representing the Holocaust. In fact, as Fredric Jameson argues, whether the meaning of a text is either intended or unintended is less relevant than a so-called political unconscious that speaks through texts and reflects “a fundamental dimension of our collective thinking and our collective fantasies about history and reality” (3).

An impressive work, Victor Hugo’s novel nonetheless did not possess some remarkable prescience in speaking to the Holocaust a century before the Nazis rose to power. Rather, the political unconscious has appropriated Les Misérables as a momentous text that speaks to everything from the Civil War to the World Wars. Here, one must distinguish between the book itself in its physical manifestation as a bound volume and the more abstract manifestation of the book as an abstract signifier of cultural capital. The myriad adaptations that establish and re-establish the context within which one reads the meaning of this text perpetually renew this capital. According to the Internet Movie Database, there are at least 20 different film adaptations of Les Misérables, beginning as early as 1909. This list includes the 1935 version directed by Polish émigré Richard Boleslawski for 20th-Century-Fox and a 1995 concert film of the Broadway musical by librettist Alain Boublil and composer Jean-Michel Schonberg. Decades after the publication of the book, its themes of redemption and justice still capture public imagination.

One can trace the popularity of the novel’s various incarnations to the critical reputation of the novel itself. Appearing in the United States during the Civil War as a multi-volume set, the publication of Hugo’s opus garnered acclaim as the event of the century. According to Jeanne Rosselet, however, some reviewers derided the acclaim as part of “a system of puffing at which Barnum himself would be amazed” (39). The 1863 Atlantic Monthly review of the book chastises the methods of the publisher for exhausting “every resource of book-selling ingenuity . . . in order to make every human being who can read think that the salvation of his body and soul depends upon his reading Les Misérables” (Rosselet, 39).
This fairly ornery review gives some indication of how twentieth
century adaptations could appropriate a nineteenth century text as a
resonant commentary upon the Holocaust. An impressive work
independent of its publicity, Les Misérables nonetheless emerged from
within a network of cultural and social significance that almost
immediately configured its status as a high culture text. As the more
recent crisis over representing the Holocaust demonstrates, cultural
cachet remains key to asserting a canon of accepted Holocaust texts.
Moreover, the novel generates a key set of themes and meanings that
reverberate throughout the popular press. For example, a review in
The New York Tribune hails the book, not as “a protest against
Civilization,” but as “a call for a wiser and nobler Civilization, one
which shall be at heart thoroughly Christian” (Rosselet, 39).

Rosselet’s article on the American reception of Les Misérables
usefully notes the text’s resonance with the abolitionist cause, and how
the Southern press discussed this matter in reviewing Hugo’s work.
While the discussion of this aspect of the book’s context does not
directly relate to the Holocaust, it does have immense implications for
how adaptations of the work would resonate with the Shoah. In contrast
to the argument of the Holocaust’s uniqueness, historian Richard
Rubinstein has argued that the Holocaust occurred as a logical
outgrowth and development of slavery. Thus the initial American
reception of the novel configured Les Misérables as a key text to address
the historical arc between nineteenth century American slavery and
twenty-first century European slave labor.

As Rosalina de la Carrera has argued, the very narrative of Les
Misérables encourages a resonant reading. De la Carrera correlates
the prominence of the sewers in the book to the human body and human
consciousness, noting Hugo’s own comparison between a sewer system
and intestines as well as his comparison between the unknown depths of
the human soul and the unknown depths of a sewer. De la Carrera
takes the correlation one step further by noting the parallel between
the sewer system as archive on one hand and Freud’s work in studying
the human unconscious as a repository for hidden but not fully discarded
memories on the other (839).

If human consciousness operates like the multi-layered urban
topography that de la Carrera locates in Les Misérables, then why would
the products of this consciousness not operate at any lesser degree of
transparency? With varying degrees of explicitness, post-Holocaust
adaptations of Les Misérables have found resonant meanings in this
nineteenth century text. For example, Claude Lelouch’s 1995 French
adaptation explicitly encourages this resonant reading by updating the
novel’s setting and narrative to Vichy and postwar France. Lelouch’s
adaptation is itself resonant with the novel, its cinematic characters
frequently referring to and even critiquing their literary counterparts.
Moreover, Lelouch’s version makes manifest the historical trajectory
that Rubinstein traces between American slavery and European slave
labor.

In contrast to the Lelouch version, the 1998 Bille August version
remains much more faithful to the original, conforming to expectations
of a surface realism with regard to time, space, and setting. Yet it too
functions as a resonant text. In order to make this argument, I rely
upon a number of concepts. In his own discussion of resonance, Frederic
Jameson argues that meaning lies not at the surface of a text but as part
of a larger “master code” narrative (3). Roland Barthes similarly argues
for a series of larger codes at work, including what he calls a semic
code. In this semic code, the medium itself encourages a unique set of
meanings. Resonance remains of particular interest to the act of
adaptation, where George Bluestone observes, the original undergoes
an inevitable transformation. Barthes’ notion of readers activating the
meaning of a text—as opposed to meaning self-contained within a
text—also remains crucial to the concept of resonance. And finally,
Freudian notions of repression—in which meaning can operate at
various levels of overtness—can help explain the resonant text.

Postwar representation of the Holocaust relies on a particular set
of semic and narrative signifiers that by the mid-1990s could command
powerful preferred readings. Although these signifiers had begun to
emerge as early as the mid-1950s, a well-defined set of textual
conventions consistently defined the representation of the Holocaust
less than fifty years later. As a consistent code, the representation of
the Holocaust operates within a highly charged cultural context. For
years, an informal Hollywood prohibition proscribed overt depiction
of concentration camps until Sidney Lumet’s 1965 independent film,
The Pawnbroker. As discussed above, author Elie Wiesel, himself a
survivor, maintains that no fictional depiction of the Holocaust could
ever do this traumatic event justice. Spielberg’s Schindler’s List debuted
amid national concern over the rise of Holocaust denial. Its subsequent
premiere on network television sparked an intense debate over violence,
nudity, and the recent implementation of a television rating system.

Adaptation itself serves as a powerful signifier within the code of Holocaust representation. As George Bluestone notes, early filmmakers first adapted novels as a way to raise the cultural clout of the medium. Adaptation has since played a key role in bringing the Holocaust to the screen. George Stevens' _The Diary of Anne Frank_ (1959) adapted the Broadway play, which in turn dramatized the actual found diary. Films from _The Pawnbroker_ to _Sophie's Choice_ (1985) to _Schindler's List_ all adapted novels as their source. By referring to drama and literature, these films deploy adaptation as a signifier of importance and reverence.

The act of adaptation figures prominently in both versions of _Les Misérables_. Popular reviews of Lelouch's version take pains to note that it is not in fact an adaptation of Hugo's novel, but a recycling of it. This appears a rather significantly connotative distinction, at once encouraging a resonant reading yet at the same time warning the viewer of a less than authentic experience. At the same time, popular reviews of the August version discount its faithfulness to the text as uninspired. Unlike the Lelouch version, the August one does hew closer to the original narrative and relies heavily on its period setting. Such faithfulness ultimately works to repress the resonant meaning of this adaptation, which nonetheless slips through via a series of semic and narrative codes.

The semic and narrative codes that help define a modern Holocaust film include duration, color (or lack thereof), and of course certain thematic motifs in the plotting of the story. Obviously, any one of these codes taken out of context could apply to any film. However, the particular configuration of these codes retains a resonance to Holocaust filmmaking. Both films have running times of more than two hours, in keeping with films which overtly reference the Holocaust whose duration itself announces a certain significance. Both films rely on a widescreen process beyond the typical 1.85:1 ratio, again using a spatial signifier to denote the importance of the text. In terms of color, the August version manipulates the film stock during Jean Valjean's flashback sequences, using a grainy, high-contrast and washed out image to denote Valjean's harsh prison labor. The blue tint of these scenes further connotes the image of the black and white photograph. In a much more self-conscious manner, _Schindler's List_ recalls the same photographic stock through its use of black and white photography. Such techniques powerfully signify the Allied forces' act of documenting the conditions of concentration and work camps fifty years ago.

In terms of narrative, both adaptations of _Les Misérables_ conform to important aspects of the semic code involving setting, violence, identity, hiding, hunger, memory, and social justice. Not all of these codes remain readily accessible, resonating with some aspects of this code while eliding others. The August version, for example, uses on-location filming in Prague as a stand-in for nineteenth-century Paris, an intriguing selection given Prague's historical significance as the location for Nazism's so-called Jewish Museum, a project that attempted to archive Jewish life and culture after Nazism had exterminated European Jewry. In terms of its narrative structure, the flashback sequences depicting Jean Valjean's imprisonment in the August version parallel the violent imagery associated with Nazi work camps. The first flashback depicts guards savagely beating Valjean after he drops an enormous boulder he carries in the rock quarry.

![The Jewish Memorial at Buchenwald](image)
The images of hard labor in a rock quarry hold special significance for Holocaust imagery. In camps such as Buchenwald and Mauthausen, the Nazis used these quarries as instruments of torture to literally work inmates to death. Although exact figures are difficult to locate, good estimates indicate that tens of thousands of prisoners died in this fashion. The memorial to Jews at Buchenwald who perished in the camp consists entirely of stones brought from the camp's quarry to line a slight depression in the ground. The establishing shot of the quarry in August's version parallels the camera angle and the position of the photograph taken by Allied soldiers upon liberating the quarry at Mauthausen in 1945. According to the confession of Franz Ziereis, commander of the Mauthausen concentration camp:

Himmler gave the order to load a 45 kilo stone on an inmate's back and make him run around with it until he fell dead. Himmler ordered us to establish a penal labor company according to this system. The inmates had to haul stones until they collapsed, then they were shot and their record was annotated "Trying to escape." Others were driven into a fence made of charged high-tension wire. Others were literally torn to pieces by the dog named "Lord" belonging to the camp commander Bachmeyer who sicced it on the inmates. On 30 April 1943, inmates of the camp office were ordered to assemble in the courtyard. There they were shot like wild animals by SS Oberscharführer Niedermeyer and the Gestapo agent Polaska. Altogether, as far as I know, 65,000 inmates were murdered in Mauthausen. In most cases, I myself took part in the executions.

The history of these forced labor camps belies the narrative told in Schindler's List, which for all of that film's realism, ultimately conceals the role of capitalism in the Third Reich. Mauthausen and Buchenwald provided a cheap source of labor for the Nazi-created company Deutsche Erd- und Steinwerke GmbH (DEST), or German Earth and Stone Works Company. Before DEST altered its production to the manufacture of aircraft carrier parts, it would use so-called shiftless foreign laborers to quarry the stone necessary to construct massive Nazi monuments and buildings. The image of the rock quarry thus invokes powerful meanings of slave labor and exploitation during the Third Reich. At the same time, however, the globalized Holocaust text camouflages and even recuperates the role of capitalism in its logical pursuit of slave labor, using the semic code of the Holocaust to emphasize the primacy of personal rather than power-based relationships.
In both the Lelouch and August versions, the effects of this capitalism manifest themselves most viscerally upon the female body. Such gendered specificity resonates with familiar tropes of Holocaust representation, such as prostitution and the shearing of hair. The Lelouch version explicitly invokes the acts of violence against women that took place during the Holocaust, as the Nazis force Mrs. Ziman into prostitution. Toward the end of the film, she appears with her hair shorn, the requisite punishment in liberated France for women who had sexual relations with Nazi soldiers. More implicitly, the August version activates its narrative resonance with the Holocaust by reversing the causality of capitalism and its effects upon gender. After a supervisor at Jean Valjean’s factory fires Fantine for having a daughter out of wedlock, Fantine must sell her body to pay foster parents to take care of her child. August’s version suggests that the selling of her hair precipitates her eventual submission to prostitution. Like the image of the quarry, the image of shorn hair holds powerful resonance with the Holocaust. Soviet troops discovered seven tons of human hair at Auschwitz alone, much of it awaiting shipment to Germany for the manufacture of cloth.

Fantine selling her hair in August’s Les Misérables.

Mrs. Ziman with her hair shorn in Claude Lelouch’s Les Misérables.

Rather than explicitly engage with the parallels of the Holocaust as the Lelouch version does, however, the August version resonates most forcefully with another representation of the Holocaust. As Jean Valjean, Liam Neeson recalls his role as beneficent factory owner Oskar Schindler. Neeson’s star intertext remains crucial here. While Schindler’s List and August’s Les Misérables vary in how explicitly they invoke Holocaust imagery, they both seek to recuperate the role of capitalism through the image of a kind and compassionate businessman who can redeem an otherwise exploitative system. Both films feature Neeson pensively sitting at a desk above the factory floor, playing a dangerous double role but one that gives the system its heart. Neeson’s star intertext helps camouflage the exploitative nature of capitalism. In invoking the image of Schindler, Neeson’s Valjean adds import to the ideological motif that “one man can make a difference.” August’s version thus reinforces Schindler’s List’s recuperation of capitalism, which in the case of the latter film completely distorts the history of German companies and subsidiaries, the vast majority of whom benefited from the influx of cheap and expendable slave labor.

Piles of women’s hair as documented in Alain Resnais’ Night and Fog.
former fellow prisoner revealing the numbers 1789 on his forearm. How does one explain this anachronism?

Conflating the Holocaust with the failure of the French Revolution.

In Lelouch's much more explicit engagement of the Holocaust, the 1995 film deploys the resonance between Hugo's text and the adaptation context to comment on the ambiguities of French resistance and collaboration during World War II. Midway through the film, a French farm couple agrees to shelter the Jewish lawyer André Ziman. The narrative raises the disturbingly fine line between protection and imprisonment, for the couple soon becomes Ziman's jailer. Even after the war has ended, they keep him locked in a room so that they can continue to draw money from his Swiss bank account. These scenes resonate with themes of hiding, imprisonment and rescue, not just within Lelouch's version but also directly with Hugo's text. The film adaptation suggests a number of intriguing analogues to the novel. Ziman and his family escape from France by promising to read Les Misérables to Roger Fortin, a truck driver and boxing champion who identifies Jean Valjean with his father, also wrongly accused of a crime he did not commit. In World War II France, the charity of a farm couple that seemingly parallels the characters of the Bishop and nuns who shelter Valjean can just as easily parallel Inspector Javert's obsession to destroy Valjean, or the Thenardiers who use Fantine's daughter Cosette as a way to draw sums of money from the mother. Ziman's faith in Hugo's narrative results in his ultimate imprisonment at the hands of jailers who are not the characters that they appear to first represent. This lack of pure faithfulness to the text evokes a multifaceted resonance with issues central to the Holocaust. Rather than offer literal or oversimplified villains and heroes, Lelouch's version suggests that one has faith in a narrative at his or her own peril.
As the Lelouch adaptation demonstrates, then, the issue is not whether to represent the Holocaust, since that film’s ambiguity and intriguing references to the novel raise profound questions central to understanding the Shoah. Rather, in terms of the trivialization that Wiesel fears, one would do well to maintain sensitivity to implicit invocations of Holocaust imagery, but especially the ideological function that these invocations serve. A United States production, Bille August’s version nonetheless retains traces of being a globalized text. The DVD includes both a French audio track as well as optional French and English subtitles. Beyond these aspects, however, this version of Les Misérables uses Holocaust imagery to propound an ethos of global capitalism. In this context, the anachronistic tattoo on the prisoner’s forearm bears a kind of logic. Since the French Revolution has clearly “marked” the atrocity of its failure on the body of the allegedly liberated, just as the Holocaust has marked its atrocity on the body of the survivor, only the ability of “one person to make a difference” will truly prevail. Yet it is exactly this credo that globalization deploys in order to mask its own history and logic during the Holocaust, when and where the vast majority of companies lacked benevolent capitalists as portrayed by Neeson. Faithfulness to a text can still trivialize the Holocaust; ignoring how ideology deploys such references, no matter how implicit, can only result in allowing globalization to render the Holocaust in the most superficial, simplistic, and ultimately self-serving terms.

Works Cited


Contributors

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Michael DeAngelis is an Assistant Professor at DePaul University’s School for New Learning, where he teaches in the areas of film, television, and cultural studies. He is the author of Gay Fandom and Crossover Stardom: James Dean, Mel Gibson, and Keanu Reeves (Duke University Press, 2001) and is currently working on a book-length study of art cinema distribution and exhibition in the 1960s and 1970s.

Noël Herpe teaches the history of French cinema at the University of Chicago. He is a member of the editorial committee of Positif and an advisor for the selection of foreign films at the Cannes Film Festival. He recently published Le Film dans le texte: L’oeuvre écrite de René Clair (Paris : Jean-Michel Place, 2001) and directed a special issue of 1895 (no. 34-35, October 2001) on Max Ophuls. He is currently preparing the proceedings of a conference devoted to the theoretical work and films of Eric Rohmer.

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